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Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

7888th meeting
Wednesday, 22 February 2017, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Yelchenko	(Ukraine)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Arancibia Fernández
	China	Mr. Shen Bo
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mrs. Audouard
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Senegal	Mr. Ciss
	Sweden	Mr. Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Sison
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/144)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/144)

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/144, the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: As this is my first time before the Council since the very sad and sudden news of the passing of the former Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, I want to convey my deep respect and sympathies to his family, to the Russian people and the Government, and to all his diplomatic colleagues.

Three years ago to the day, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2139 (2014). Next month we will mark a grim anniversary — six years of war that have devastated a nation, its people and its children. Syrians have seen their country reduced to rubble and their loved ones killed and injured. The majority of the population — some 13.5 million people — are in dire need of protection and humanitarian assistance. Nearly 85 per cent of Syrians live in poverty, with more than two-thirds of the population living in either extreme or abject poverty. Over 12.8 million people in Syria require health assistance, and more than 7 million are food-insecure amidst rising prices and food shortages. Households spend up to a quarter of their income just on water. Total wheat production in 2016 was 1.3 million metric tons, a reduction of 45 per cent relative to 2015, and 63 per cent relative to pre-crisis levels. The destruction of essential infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, the devaluation of the currency, the impact of sanctions, rising food prices, the shortages of food and electricity, as well as a lack of clean water, have exacted a high toll on the majority of Syrian families and communities throughout the country.

In 2016, the rate of displacement continued unabated, with an average of over 5,000 people displaced per day between January and December, some more than once. Over half of all Syrians have been forced from their homes since 2011, 6.3 million of whom are internally displaced. More than 4.9 million have registered as refugees in neighbouring countries, and nearly 1.2 million Syrians have applied for asylum in Europe.

The children caught up in this war have fared the worst. They have been killed and maimed, lost parents to the violence, suffered physical and psychological trauma, been forced into early marriages, and fallen years behind in school. Recruitment — very often through indoctrination, abduction, arrest and coercion — has been widespread in all areas, with 90 per cent of the 217 surveyed subdistricts in Syria reporting its occurrence.

The lack of economic and educational opportunities, the experiences of violence, displacement, profound distress, family loss and the deprivation of psychosocial needs — such as a sense of purpose, control and significance — have all been major drivers of vulnerability. Child labour, owing to the widespread devastation of livelihoods and family separation, was reported in 82 per cent of surveyed subdistricts across the country, including its most dangerous and hazardous forms, namely, begging, smuggling, scavenging, recruitment and the use of children in the conflict and illicit activities.

Moreover, with the war entering its sixth year, 5.82 million children and young people, from preschool to secondary-school age, including more than 118,000 Palestinian refugee children, are in need of education assistance inside Syria. An estimated 1.75 million children, or almost one third of school-age children between 5 and 17 years old, are out of school. A further 1.35 million are at risk of dropping out. Syria's formal education system has lost a total of 150,000 education personnel and seen 7,400 schools — one in three

in the country — damaged, destroyed or otherwise made inaccessible. Owing to severe poverty, parents and caregivers can no longer consider their children's education a priority, with ever-increasing numbers having to remain out of school in order to support their households.

As we move ahead in 2017 towards what I hope will be a year that brings positive change to Syria, we must continue to remember just how much has been lost and the abyss from which Syria will have to emerge. Let me say that even if a political agreement were to be found tomorrow — which, of course, we all wholeheartedly desire — humanitarian needs will remain critical for months, if not years, to come. I therefore cannot emphasize strongly enough my support for all efforts to see the guns fall silent. I am, however, concerned about ongoing significant attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure that are being conducted with seeming impunity. They include bombardments and air strikes in Idlib and Dar'a, and besieged locations in the eastern Ghouta area, most notably in Duma, Harasta, Zamalka, Jobar and Arbin.

Earlier this month, the Government of Syria and the Russian Federation announced the opening of several corridors for civilians wishing to leave eastern Ghouta, one of which is through the Al-Wafedin camp. We are monitoring the situation closely, but we are concerned that the situation in eastern Ghouta may become even more tense in the coming period, should military operations increase. We are also gravely concerned about the situation in the Al-Waer neighbourhood of the city of Homs, which has been exposed to heavy aerial bombing and artillery shelling in recent days, reportedly resulting in more than 20 civilian casualties, many of them children. The shelling also affected Al-Bir hospital, the only semi-functioning medical centre in besieged Al-Waer, as well as the civil defence centre and the ambulance centre, which resulted in the death of a first-aid worker. Life in Al-Waer, which the United Nations has not been able to reach since 26 October, is becoming increasingly dire, with tens of thousands of people in need of immediate humanitarian assistance after suffering under numerous reported air strikes in recent weeks.

To the south, a substantial increase in conflict around Dar'a city was recorded on 12 February. As a precaution, all schools and universities, in both Government areas and those controlled by non-State armed groups, have been temporarily closed owing to the heavy clashes, aerial bombardment, and artillery shelling. On 19 February, Jaysh Khalid Bin Al-Walid, an affiliate of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), commenced an attack on Free Syrian Army positions on three fronts, looking to break out of the Yarmouk valley. Since the morning of 19 February, it has taken over Tseel, which has an estimated population of 34,000, Jlein and Masaken Jlein, with a combined population of 9,200, and Edoin, with a population of 4,900. Most of the residents of those villages are now reported to be under curfew, limiting their ability to flee. Along with Free Syrian Army affiliates, Jaysh Khalid Bin Al-Walid has reportedly beheaded at least one local council leader in the areas it has newly taken over. Many staff of non-governmental organizations were unable to flee before the Jaysh Khalid Bin Al-Walid advance and have now gone radio silent in those villages. Attacks have also taken place elsewhere in Dar'a governorate, with air strikes reportedly hitting six medical centres and health points on 15 February in Saida, Yadouda, Naima, Nasib, Al-Jiza, and Al-Ghana Al-Sharkia, causing severe damage to facilities and putting some of them out of service. The Al-Balad field hospital in Dar'a also appears to have been hit by an air strike and put out of service.

Owing to the increase in fighting in Rif Damascus, Idlib, Dar'a and other governorates, humanitarian access to some of those areas has been further limited. In Idlib, infighting between the Al-Nusra Front, also known as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham, and non-Nusra groups has resulted in restricted humanitarian programming and civilian movement. On 24 January, United Nations assistance through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing point was suspended for a day as a result of increased insecurity, and humanitarian actors restricted their programming for most of the last week of January, affecting 2 million people in Idlib governorate, including 900,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). To the south, the Ar-Ramtha border crossing point has been suspended since 13 February, owing to the intensified attacks in and around Dar'a city. Fighting in the south has also displaced more than 10,000 people from Dar'a city, many of whom have moved to farms and villages south-east of the city. More are likely to be displaced in the coming days if the violence continues. The displacements put further strain on a population already deeply affected by the conflict. In addition, ongoing movements into Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside, owing to evacuations and local

agreements, are increasing the humanitarian needs in many of these locations.

In the besieged four towns of Al-Zabadani, Al-Fuah, Kafraya and Madaya, which were last reached on 28 November, the situation is catastrophic, with more than 64,000 civilians trapped in a cycle of daily violence and deprivation, where malnutrition and the lack of proper medical care persist. The situation is compounded by the tit-for-tat arrangement between the four towns, which encumbers humanitarian access by imposing painstaking negotiations that are rooted in political and opportunistic considerations rather than humanitarian principles and obligations. Five people have died in Madaya and Kafraya in the past few days, among them a mother who died while giving birth. Another 80 people must be urgently evacuated if their lives are to be saved. They and others are in dire need and cannot wait any longer. I truly hope that the members of the Council and of the newly established joint group will manage to unlock this horrific gridlock on the four towns and compel the parties on the ground to enable immediate humanitarian assistance, including medical evacuations, without any further delay.

I continue to be gravely concerned about the fact that military operations against ISIL continue to result in civilian suffering. In recent weeks, for example, air strikes and fighting around both Al-Raqqa and Al-Bab have resulted in numerous civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, as well as displacements. To date, the United Nations has received reports of approximately 300 civilians killed, mainly owing to air strikes and improvised explosive devices. Civilians have also been subjected to gunfire, with ISIL fighters shooting at civilians who try to leave towards areas controlled by non-State armed groups and, in some cases, non-State armed groups shooting at civilians who appear to have been mistaken for ISIL elements.

As various parties pick up the pace to enter Al-Raqqa and Al-Bab, and as ISIL retreats, bridges, water systems and other elements of civilian infrastructure are being attacked and destroyed. Syria's Tabgah dam on the Euphrates River is a strategic facility that holds about 14 billion cubic metres of water for drinking and irrigation purposes and produces about 2.5 billion kilowatts of electricity a year. Such a facility must be protected from the effects of the ongoing conflict in the eastern and northern regions, where any damage or misuse of the dam could potentially cause significant flooding across Raqqa and even as far as Deir ez-Zor, should the dam fail. Heavy flooding would likely have catastrophic humanitarian consequences in downstream areas, submerging huge swathes of agricultural land, and affecting hundreds of thousands of people who already face critical problems in meeting their immediate needs. And as fighting moves into urban areas, there is grave concern that there will be a significant increase in civilian casualties. In recognition of the fact that civilians trapped in areas controlled by listed terrorist groups are already facing human rights abuses and humanitarian suffering, efforts to retake such areas must be undertaken with the utmost care for the plight of the many hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in those locations.

As we all know, the United Nations and its implementing partners reach millions of Syrians via regular and cross-border programming each month. The lack of safe, unimpeded and sustained access remains, however, the greatest obstacle to reaching people in need in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The cumulative reach of humanitarian actors to besieged and hard-to-reach areas through inter-agency convoys and airdrops increased from 620,000 in 2015 to more than 3.3 million in 2016.

Yet, despite this considerable improvement, humanitarian actors are all too seldom able to deliver life-saving assistance and protection services in a timely, effective, sustainable and strictly needs-based basis. A review of inter-agency cross-border convoys in 2016 showed that a lack of predictable access prevented the implementation of two-thirds of the requests initially approved by the Government of Syria. These were primarily due to administrative, security and operational constraints. During the second half of 2016, inter-agency convoys were only allowed to proceed during the last 10 working days of the month, and those convoys that did deploy had medical items routinely removed. In fact, 67 of the 99 inter-agency cross-line convoys in 2016 had a significant number of medical items removed.

As previously stated, in December last year, only one convoy was deployed throughout that month, to Khan al-Shih reaching 6,000 people, despite the fact that the United Nations had received initial approvals to reach almost 800,000 people in hard-to-reach and besieged locations. Similarly, in January, only a single convoy could be deployed, delivering aid to 40,000 people in Mu'addamiyah al-Sham. And so far, in February, only

two convoys have been able to deploy — to Talbiseh on 5 February delivering aid to 84,000, and to Ar-Rastan on 12 February with assistance to 107,500 people.

Insecurity has also forced the United Nations to abort two convoys in as many days to Al-Waer just this past week. Some 50,000 civilians in Al-Waer are facing ever-worsening humanitarian conditions and have not received humanitarian assistance for 117 days. On 19 February, the loaded convoy was forced to turn around owing to the security situation on the ground, including an incident in which a person was injured owing to a shot by a sniper. On 20 February, prior to reaching Al-Waer, the loaded the convoy was unable to proceed owing to ongoing shelling and sporadic fire. On its way back to the warehouse, several trucks filled with humanitarian supplies were diverted by civilians and unknown armed elements to a Government-controlled area. The drivers and trucks were temporarily detained and some drivers were reportedly roughed up, but have since been released, but without their humanitarian supplies. Everyone, I am pleased to say, is safe and accounted for.

I condemn this incident in the strongest possible terms and I am shocked at the blatant disregard for the protection of humanitarian workers and humanitarian assets. The United Nations will continue to try to reach the 50,000 people in need in Al-Waer with multisectoral assistance, as soon as conditions allow. I call on all parties to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian workers and assets at all times, in line with their responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

I once again urge all Member States with influence to ensure that a zero or near-zero implementation rate does not occur again in the weeks and months to come, whether that is because of administrative, security or operational constraints. The United Nations and its partners are ready and capable of delivering humanitarian assistance in challenging conditions to 300,000 people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas per week, in addition to regular programming supporting millions. We must be given the chance to do so, as the lives of many depend upon regular and unimpeded deliveries of humanitarian assistance. What we need are timely approvals and simplified approval procedures.

In this regard, and in response to the request of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in early January, as well as sustained advocacy at the level of the Humanitarian Task Force, we received commitments on the part of the Government of Syria that procedures for cross-line convoys would be simplified. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent was to now act as the main entry point for the facilitation of convoys with Government entities. We are now waiting to receive the final proposed procedural changes in writing for review. We sincerely hope that these changes will effectively address some of the bureaucratic bottlenecks that have caused the many delays in the past.

Let me also reiterate that cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan continues to represent a core element of the humanitarian response. This is especially important since the needs are growing as local agreements are sending more people to the north, as well as to some locations in southern Syria — locations which are already strained by the current IDP population, with 900,000 IDPs in Idlib governorate alone, for example. Consequently, the United Nations and its partners' cross-border deliveries have steadily increased since the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014) in July 2014. That same year, 624 trucks were inspected before crossing the border into Syria, of which 172 trucks crossed into Syria via Ar-Ramtha, Jordan, and 120 trucks via Bab al-Salam, Turkey, and 332 trucks via Bab al-Hawa, Turkey. One year later, numbers rose to more than 4,882 trucks and last year, in 2016, 6,587 trucks were inspected, of which 1,278 trucks crossed the border point of Ar-Ramtha, 495 trucks entered Syria via Bab al-Salam, and 4,814 trucks via Bab al-Hawa. I would also like to specifically point out that the bulk of our humanitarian response has been implemented by a vast panoply of non-governmental organization partners on the ground. They must be protected at all times and under all circumstances.

Let me conclude, if I may, by saying this. The eyes of all Syria and the eyes of all the world are looking to Geneva. As has been stated so many times already, there is no humanitarian or military solution to this conflict. A genuine political commitment to peace will be needed if 2017 is to offer any different prospect than the death and destruction of the past six years. Millions of battered and beleaguered women, men and children depend on meaningful action and constructive engagement by the Syrian parties and their allies, starting tomorrow at the intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva, to assure Syrians that an end to the conflict may finally be within reach.

The President: I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

The representative of Uruguay has asked to make a statement.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): Protocol, custom and good manners dictate that one must thank Stephen O'Brien for his report (S/2017/144), despite the fact that every one of his paragraphs feels more like a direct blow to the heart than information for our intellects. Mr. O'Brien places us squarely in front of the frightening reality that millions of people — hundreds of thousands of women, children and sick people — have been facing for the past six years in Syria. In this Chamber, we are once again delivering speeches.

Stephen O'Brien underscored, and every time we hear him he underscores it more, the bravery, valour and self-sacrifice of all of those anonymous humanitarian volunteers and workers on the ground, who while risking their own lives on a daily basis try to relieve the suffering of the affected people.

We are approaching the sixth anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian conflict. As we said one year ago, we hope that this will be the last year of the conflict. We have faith in the strong commitment expressed by the Secretary-General António Guterres, who must always be supported by Council members and by all the parties involved in one way or another in Syria.

After more than two months, we can say that the cessation of hostilities agreed in the waning days of 2016 has enabled a sharp drop in violence in some parts of the Syrian territory, despite numerous violations and fighting that still persist. It has allowed the delivery of relief to millions of inhabitants in Syria, who in recent years have only known war, bombing, destruction and death. It made helped to establish a propitious environment for the Astana meeting held in January and the resumption of the negotiations in Geneva between Government representatives and the opposition in Syria, with the mediation of Special Envoy Mr. Staffan de Mistura. We hope that the parties can now move forward in order to overcome their mutual distrust and make progress in the political transition process in Syria, which after a year of delays, is more necessary than ever.

Despite this more positive scenario at the political level, the situation of civilians in Syria remains alarming. It is very disturbing that despite the ongoing cessation of hostilities, humanitarian access seems to be getting worse month after month. It seems that humanitarian access continues to be increasingly difficult with each passing month. That is an unacceptable state of affairs and can no longer be tolerated, as millions of people depend on those deliveries. That is why it is necessary to confront the obstructions to the regular provision of humanitarian aid — primarily, the insecurity on the ground and the lack of administrative authorization.

Similarly, the lack of consensus among the parties regarding the ceasefire agreements in four locations — Al-Fu'ah, Kafraya, Madaya and Zabadani — signals a new and imminent humanitarian catastrophe that could lead to tragic scenes like those we witnessed one year ago when the population was literally dying of hunger. It is appalling to once again hear reports of medical kits being taken from the convoys, actions that constitute crimes against humanity, as the aid was to be delivered to the most vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women, children and the infirm. We note that aerial deliveries to Deir ez-Zor, which had been suspended in mid-January, have fortunately been resumed. We are also pleased that the ceasefire in Wadi Barada has allowed a partial resumption of the drinking water supply to Damascus.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate Uruguay's view on what our priorities should be if hope to significantly improve t... humanitarian situation of Syria's civilian population: the consolidation of ceasefires throughout most of the country; the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure by all parties to the conflict; the protection of hospitals, medical and health personnel, and educational establishments, as well as their personnel and students; the urgent raising of sieges, which have no place in the twenty-first century; immediate, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the country, in keeping with the monthly plans that the United Nations has submitted to the Syrian authorities; and the ongoing and relentless fight against terrorism in all of its forms, particularly in Al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, while always keeping the protection of civilians as the top priority; and progress towards a political solution to the conflict, which we hope the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, will inform us of as soon as possible.

The President: I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 3.30 p.m.